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ABSTRACT

This paper presents basic principles of parent-teacher cooperation in both home-based and school-based programs. It is suggested that interest in parent-teacher involvement has grown as a result of several other developments: a growing national interest in child development and preschool education; a change in attitude toward the value of preschool experience; an increase in the time available to parents for outside activities because of modern time-saving devices in the home; and the women's liberation movement. Interest in working with parents is based on their being the child's first and most important teachers and on the improvement in both parenting and teaching possible through an exchange of information. The necessity of agreement by parents and teachers on developmental factors is stressed. Such factors include the importance of the child's self image, the effect of environment on intelligence, the importance of the environment to learning, and the necessity of matching a learning task to the child's developmental level. The second half of the paper lists specific strategies for parents and teachers working together. A section on home-based interaction includes suggestions to teachers about observation and communication. For school-based programs, ten basic principles are listed that deal with establishing a successful parent volunteer program. (SB)

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PARENT AND TEACHER STRATEGIES FOR WORKING TOGETHER

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PARENT AND TEACHER STRATEGIES FOR WORKING TOGETHER

Within the past 10 or 11 years since the beginning of Head Start, the interest in parent and teacher involvement has mushroomed. Particularly at the early and middle childhood levels, parents, teachers, and school administrators are realizing the importance of genuine parent and teacher involvement. Historically speaking, parent and teacher involvement has been of concern to educators for nearly a century (Gordan, 1968). As early as 1891 American educators were proposing that (Gordan, 1968, pp. 1):

> We must labor as earnestly in the homes as in the kindergarten. The former is the starting point of all civilization; and, in the effort to elevate humanity, we should endeavor to strengthen and purify, if possible, the home. To do this, regular and systematic home visiting must be done by persons who are especially prepared for the work . . .
>
> To more closely connect the kindergarten and the home interests, mother's meeting should be inauguarated; the objects of these gatherings being to give talks on the care of children, household duties, and the responsibility of motherhood . . . .

However, it is only recently that teacher and parents alike have been ernestly and genuinely seeking ways to develop and effectively implement parent and teacher involvement. Some of the factors that have contributed to the growing interest in parent and teacher involvement are (Yawkey, 1974, pp. 4-7):

1. A growing national interest in child development and preschool education. Child development means programs and research into the physical, affective, social, and intellectual development of young children. This interest grew out of the 1920's and was fanned by federal government spending on educational programs for young children during the depression years of 1927

through 1933. Research results have shown the importance of the early years in sharing life-long development and learning. Research results have also shown the importance of the parent and their role as the child's first teachers.

2. The spirit or tone of the times. There seems to be a changing attitude about what is good for the young child. The attitude that a child's place was with her parents in the home until the child reached the magic school age is currently undergoing a shift. This shift of attitude is saying that care and schooling is desirable and even essential. Parents feel that if children are given these early learning experiences, their children will be out in front in-the-race-to-the-school-house. The concern of "schooling" for the child has resulted in earlier contacts between parents and teachers than a decade ago.

3. Modern technology. Within the home labor saving devices and the "pop-in-the-oven" foods have contributed to the easing of domestic pressure on adults. With the ease of domestic pressure has come a greater amount of time to engage in interests and activities other than household chores.

4. Women's liberation movement. Women have just as equal rights as men to careers and lives of their own is a current social-cultural fact. By 1890, it is projected that there will be 6 million working mothers with young children under six years of age. Now as in the future, working mothers by necessity require programs and services for their children. They want to know that their child is receiving the best care possible. Parents also want to assist with the growth and learning of their children. This means involvement of parents in early childhood programs and opportunities to develop parent and teacher cooperation.

Basic Assumptions of Parents and Teachers Working Together

The first basic set of assumptions underlying the teacher and parent strategies for working together in school and home based programs deal with the parent. These are:

1. Parents are the child's primary first and most important teachers. The research of Caldwell and Richmond (1965), Gordan (1972), Lally (1973), Weikart and Lambie (1968), and others in child development and parent involvement have effectively shown that parents are teachers and that parental teaching can be learned. The research results have also shown that there is greater probability of maximum benefit to the child when parents learn and develop their teaching role. The current working principle challenges the m7th that teaching is solely the domain of trained professionals in school settings and that children's learning in school is totally independent from that of the home.

2. The relationships between child and parent can be strengthened through sharing of information. The strength of the relationship can be increased through sharing of relevant information between teachers and parents in areas of nutrition, health needs, home management, and child development techniques. The net effect of shared information helps develop feelings that parents play a vital role in their child's learning and growth. Parents develop a greater feeling that their contributions can help shape growth and learning by constructing a facilitative environment. Thus, by genuinely sharing of relevant information, parents feel important and necessary to their child's development and generate feelings of self worth and esteem for themselves and their important roles.

3. The parents and professionals can jointly assist one another in the child's learning and growing. The intervention studies of Gilmer, Miller, and Gray (1970), Gordon (1972), Levenstein (1972) and many others, have shown the effects derived from genuine involvement of both professional and parent working together. Parents benefit because they are giving as well as getting. Both professionals working with parents by more effective planning contribute to the development of the child. Joint assistance in free give and take fashion ultimately increases the effectiveness of early and middle childhood programs and services. The immediate recipients of joint assistance and increased effectiveness are the children.

Prior to setting up strategies for parents and teachers working together we must establish ground rules concerning the young child's development and learning. After all, it would be very difficult for parents and teachers to work toward the same goals if each has a different view of the child.

Well, then, what do we know about the young child's development and learning? We know that there are at least four developmental factors which affect the child's learning (Hess & Croft, 1972).

1. Self-image; self-esteem
2. Flexible and changable I.Q.
3. Interactions between the child and the environment
4. Level of functioning determines interest and understanding

Self-Image

The child's self-image is an important factor in the child's learning, for it determines his/her willingness to explore and experiment. A self-

confident child is not fearful of the results of his/her actions and will make novel attempts which lead to discovery. The self-conscious child, on the other hand, is restrained from action by fear of unknown consequences. The self-conscious child acts for perceived approval rather than for novel outcomes (Hildebrand, 1975).

Flexible I.Q.

While certain individuals still argue that heredity determines intelligence, the argument appears to be successfully enmeshed in a web of cynicism. Far too much research indicates that the environment affects a child's intelligence to impell us to believe otherwise. Since the environment affects intelligence we--parents and teachers--may control intelligence within limits (bowing to the natavists). By providing a stimulating environment (which carries implications from the other three factors) we may "strengthen" a child's intelligence to the best of his abilities (Gordon, 1975).

Child and Environment

In noting the child's flexible I.Q., we emphasized the importance of the environment. The child must interact with the environment in order to build concepts. Learning which does not provide for this necessary interaction is rote learning. We do not imply that rote learning is bad--it simply does not aid the child in developing concepts (Taylor, 1975).

Level of Functioning

The type of environment which is provided for the child must be matched

to his developmental level of functioning (Hunt, 1965). A task for the child cannot be too far above his/her level of functioning because the child will not have the appropriate strategies to even approach the task--much less attempt it. Then, too, the task must not incorporate the learning strategies which the child has readily available for then the task is too easy, and uninteresting. Therefore, the task must incorporate some of the child's familiar learning strategies and some strategies which are new in order to make the task challenging and also advance the child's learning.

In working with the child, it is important to adjust the learning situation to provide for each of these basic assumptions.

Parent/Teacher Agreement

It is essential that parents and teacher agree on each of these assumptions in order to work together effectively (Connant, 1971). For example, if either the parent or teacher believes that a child's I.Q. is fixed, this notion will adversely affect the adults' behavior with that child. Furthermore, a disagreement on so basic an issue of child development may create friction which can be disastrous to the parent/teacher relationship. Acceptance of these four assumptions, then, provides a foundation for cooperative interaction between the parent and teacher.

Strategies for Parents and Teachers Working Together . . .

Regardless of whether the programs are aimed at early or middle childhood education, there is currently greater recognition that any enduring change in the child's development can only be brought about through appreciable change

in the people associated with the child on a day-to-day basis. In context of either home or school, the major change agents are the parent and teacher. Dr. Marcie Southall highlighted the importance of the parent and teacher with the following observation of the preschool child. The preschool child is talking with her mother and teacher, said "HOW CAN YOU BOTH TEACH ME UNLESS YOU KNOW ONE ANOTHER?". This statement from a preschooler provides a rational basis for cooperation between parent and teacher. Cooperation and genuine involvement between parent and teacher can become reality, if an only if, certain understandings or strategies are internalized by teacher and parents in home and school based programs. Key working strategies for parents and teachers in home and school based programs follow.

. . . in Home Based Programs

Accompanying the practical use of the assumptions are several strategies that teachers and parents can think about and use to facilitate working relationships. In the context of home-based programs, selected observation and communication strategies for parents and teacherw working together follow.

Observation strategies: Inside or outside the home, teachers can understand the realistic constraints and demands of parents and children they work through observational procedures. However, teachers require some training in observing before they can gain insights into and become more responsive to the needs of parents and children. They will also be able to gather valuable background information in the parents and children with whom they work and will be in a better position to use the strategies and ultimately assist the parent. Observation strategies include:

1. Putting our feelings aside;

2. looking for current patterns of behavior; and,

3. looking for emerging patterns of behavior.

A sample set of observation strategies could be developed, explained, and practiced with professionals before and during teachers' work with parents and children. Such strategies include:

1. Putting our own feelings aside. For example, observe how parent and child feel about situations and how they respond to everyday demands of living, learning, and earning. Parents and teachers must be able to "share themselves". In order for this to occur, teachers must first show parents the "whats" and "hows" of sharing. Value judgments placed on the ideas shared serve no purpose and arouse hostility in the parent. The parent and professional can help each other through a climate of acceptance. Just as professionals learn to "get it all out" he or she can help the parents do the same. Professionals can also be shown that tolerating mistakes is the first step in helping parents begin to evaluate and make changes in his or her behavior without loss of self-worth.

2. Looking for current patterns of behavior. Do parents continually conflict on what is best for their child? Is one parent currently having health or alcoholic problems? Does one parent continually refuse to follow suggestions on how to work with their children? This procedural technique provides the professional with further information not only on the family, but the power structure operating within the family group.

3. Looking for emerging patterns of behavior. Watching to see if a parent tries one or two suggested activities is important. Whether or not

a parent succeeds in following through or completes the suggested activity is not important. For example, a parent may try a suggested activity with her child. At first glance, the end result may not clearly indicate much change in either the child's or the parent's learning. But the parent has tried. Here the trying is of fundamental importance and not the finished, completed, or end result of the activity.

Communication Strategies: For developing cooperative relationships between parents and teachers, it is important to first explore, evaluate, and expand their own self-concepts and personalities. For this to occur, it is essential that a climate of acceptance and trust be developed between teacher and parent. A key ingredient is successful professional training sessions to explore feelings about self and how to best meet the demands of working with parents and children. The effectiveness of this technique is strongly tied to the leadership provided by staff training (see suggestions for staff training on page). It is important to develop adequate skill in group facilitation and understanding of how group processes operate. Of equal importance is a working background knowledge of the parents and a sensitivity to goals which emerge from parent and teacher discussion sessions. Within the context of such a setting, parents can begin to identify and verbalize their concerns and needs. Through the interaction of parents and teachers, behavior can be clarified, alternatives proposed, solutions tried, plans and strategies implemented.

Although personal styles of communication vary, there are several basic common components which professionals can learn to use with parents. These strategies include: (1) examining alternatives; (2) accepting differing ideas; and (3) learning to listen.

1. Examining alternatives. A home based teacher is continually confronted with new problems to solve and decisions to make. The immediate solution of telling the parents the "right" answer may seem the most expedient and efficient at the time. However, the professional must help the parents develop awareness of and understanding about their problems. Telling the "right" answer produces little desire to try to solve problems. Teachers can assist the parent by involving him or her in the process of decision making and problem solving. Examining the problems and suggesting alternative solutions are fundamental to learning to work together. A professional, in making time to examine and explore alternatives and weigh possible and realistic consequences with parents, is demonstrating and employing a basic approach to problem solving that will be modeled by the parent (and in turn by the child). The teacher in providing opportunities to practice decision-making and working out problems assists in building a stronger relationship with the parent. Through continued exposure the process prepares the parent to assume greater responsibility.

2. Accepting differing ideas. Both teachers and parents have ideas and understandings of child rearing and home management. Some of these ideas may be similar--while others will differ. The home based teacher in employing the strategy of accepting differing ideas, must, first, be able to recognize these differences. To recognize differences comparison must be made between parents and teachers ideas. Recognizing differences in the context of building trust and stronger relationships between parents and teachers requires teachers to emphasize the ideas that are similar.

3. Learning to listen. Listening effectively is more than hearing words. Many of the words parents use such as love, father, trust, and others are the same across families. The words may be the same, but differences in meaning can be picked up by listening to inflections of the voice, looking at facial expressions, and watching body movements. The only way professionals can determine the "real" meaning behind words is to check out their perceptions of them in the environment. Professionals in discussions with parents can ask themselves, "Am I really hearing the message?". It is important how professionals feel about situations. Yet, teacher's solutions to situations can be artificial--because they lack full understanding of the problem. It is more important to observe how parents (and children) feel about situations. Only by learning to listen to the parents, can teachers understand how parents feel about situations.

Practicing and using the observation and communication strategies will help to strengthen relationships between parent and teacher. By building relationships of trust and acceptance between the parent and teacher, the professional will be in a better position to understand and help. The main benefactor of genuinely working together is the child.

. . . in School Based Programs

There are essentially ten basic principles for successfully working with parents in the school. Each is important to insure an outstanding volunteer program for the children, the parents, the school, and the greater community (Yawkey & Silvern, 1974).

1. Continued participation by parents depends upon significant rewards. Rewards may come from the teacher as well as the children, the faculty and the administration. Daily rewards from the teacher and faculty include a smile and a warm greeting. Rewards from the children may include enthusiasm in working with the parent and behavior which makes the parent's role comfortable.

2. Parents must see the relationship of their work to the total classroom effort. Teachers may achieve this principle by setting aside time to plan with a parent or a set of parents. In this way the entire program for a small period of time may be explained with the parents noting their role in the process of education.

3. Parents must feel and understand the importance of their contribution. This principle may be achieved in many ways. First, the teacher may simply tell the parent. Records which show a child's improvement can be used to show the parent the importance of his/her work. Incidents in which a child has excelled because of a parent's contribution may be related to the parent. Simply hearing from the children that they are appreciated may help parents feel the importance of their role.

4. Parents must achieve success in their initial classroom efforts. This can be insured by giving parents managable tasks with cooperative groups of children. Furthermore, the teacher should make sure that the parent realizes that he/she was successful.

5. Parents must be provided with opportunities to grow and learn. Special workshops may be provided for parents. Some teachers may wish to share ideas and information individually or with a group of parents.

6. Parents should be encouraged to make decisions regarding appropriate events. This behavior can easily be encouraged by teachers asking parents for their opinions. For example, who should work with you today? Do you think Billy needs more work in this area? Which materials do you think the children work best with?

7. Parents work best in a friendly warm atmosphere, where their efforts are obviously needed and appreciated. How do you like people to relate to you? Project that feeling onto parents and act just the way you would like to see other people act.

8. Parents must not be taken for granted. Remember that parents have needs and feelings. Be cognizant that parents are performing a valuable service and should be treated with respect and consideration. Working together, after all, does not imply a one-sided proposition.

9. Keep parents informed about school "news". This can be done through memos, newsletters, notes, and word of mouth. "News", however, is different from gossip.

10. Care enough about parents to learn their strengths. Find out what they especially like to do with children. Also determine the specific skills of parents. Work these strengths into your classroom planning.

In addition, special events such as parties, theatre trips, sporting events and other similar activities can be arranged as an additional benefit for parents who volunteer their time to make your task easier and class outcomes better.

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